DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 439 459 CS 510 270

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TITLE Learning To Dance and Why Is It Men Lead and Women Follow: Popular Theatre's Potential for Disrupting Everyday Rituals of Power.
PUB DATE 2000-04-00
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 24-28, 2000).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Existentialism; Higher Education; *Power Structure; *Social Change; *Theater Arts
IDENTIFIERS *Marginality; Rituals; *Theater of the Absurd

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the Theatre of the Absurd as a type of popular theater which can be used as a weapon of deconstruction and a tool for empowerment for marginalized social, economic, and political groups. It raises the issue of how institutions, most notably educational institutions, invoke rituals to enforce regimes of normalcy. The philosophical basis of the paper is the idea of ritual as foundation for power, which is incorporated into the paradigm of power-as-dance. The paper begins by discussing power in relationships between men and women, in situations of confession, in institutional normalization, and in the carrying out of ritual actions. The paper uses a short story by Anton Chekhov to illustrate power relationships. It continues by describing the place and function of popular theater in society and ritualization, and provides groundwork for exploration of uses of ritual as both a social control and a tool for social transformation. The short story by Anton Chekhov is attached. (Contains 31 references.) (EF)

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by Steve Noble

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LEARNING TO DANCE AND WHY IS IT MEN LEAD AND WOMEN FOLLOW:
Popular Theatre's Potential for Disrupting Everyday Rituals of Power

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Dance: *Introductions*

Virtually everyday, regardless of people, place, or time, individuals are inextricably enmeshed within various systems and acts of oppression or disempowerment. To varying degree, these processes and dynamics serve to reinforce shifting fields of power, which in turn, serve and protect existing social, economic, and political hegemonies. This paper explores a particular dynamic, which those in authority masterfully incorporate within their dancing marionette strings of privilege while maintaining social order and hierarchy: Rituals. Powerlessness can be likened to a dance of oppression – power and exploitation dancing to the "beat" of ritual.

Drawing from a Chekhovian short story, The Nincompoop (1960), first published in 1883, illustrations of dimensions of ritualized power as constructed in everyday occurrences are highlighted. The dynamic of receiving the full accounting of one's pay is just as routine today as it was over one hundred years ago. The use of a particular type of "popular" theatre – the Theatre of the Absurd –highlights specific "nodes" of entry into ritual changing elements, thereby creating greater empowerment for the people involved. My position throughout this paper is that the Theatre of the Absurd can be used as a weapon of deconstruction and tool for empowerment for marginalized social, economic, and political groups.

In order to unravel some of the elements being suggested the overall general frame of power-as-dance is used. Once this field of dance (ritual) has been delineated I describe dance partners; namely power/exploitation. The disruption, or "cutting in" on the ritualized "dance floor" movement follows through the actions of "popular theatre" or the "Theatre of the Absurd." Just as the dance dynamic is established, the movements subside back into a more or less composed sense of agency and freedom. Final thoughts and future directions for explorations within this research interest – particularly in the areas of adult education - mark the final, parting words.

The Dance Floor: *Context*

Recently, I uncovered a long lost short story written by one of literature's most enduring and endearing writers. In 1883 Anton Chekhov wrote a seemingly simple, yet powerfully subtle, instructive short story entitled, The Nincompoop (Chekhov, 1960). I have provided this story, in full, as the appendix.

The brief exchange depicted by Chekhov, highlights the typical manner in which those in authority wish to construct "the world" (theirs and those whom they control) – by reifying the existing social order as inevitable and inmmutable. Those in authority are in their positions, they will say, because it has been "predestined". Hidden underneath this veneer of "normalcy" or "neutrality" lies an intricately webbed contradiction constructed through an intriguing dynamic of empowerment and disempowerment: Ritual.

Rituals serve to ensnare both master and the servant. Rising out of the Chekhovian scenario are similarly echoed and performed elaborations within

teaching/learning relationships (among most other forms of human interaction). Within formal, informal – and nonformal settings, participants find themselves. Formal education is that learning which takes place in special, compulsory, state-supported and sanctioned institutions. These include the K-12, post-secondary, and formal, for-profit organizations. Informational education is that learning, which takes place outside of formal institutions, and is more voluntary in nature. Funding for these organizations is more based on charity donations, while being less on government monies. Non-formal education, also is discretionary, incorporates much less – or no- formal organizational structure, operating outside any formal institution or organization. These learning opportunities tend to have an ad hoc occurrence and exist within community development efforts. Often, the people, who need the assistance, bring these efforts together, for themselves. Being outside institutional or organizational structures the rituals which emanate arise from the people's needs, not from an outside authority. Once rituals are created, it is the people, themselves, belonging to the loose group who are in charge of the evolutions. While these distinctions are broad in nature, it is for this reason that there is very likely overlapping occurring when a particular learning intervention is examined. People unwittingly become ensconced within prescribed rituals, which force them into particular objectified roles and bodily positions.

Ritual, as an entity, was first formally analyzed in the Western world in the 1800's to identify what was a universal (European) category of human culture – against which all other cultures could be judged. It is only recently that the field of ritual "theory" or "studies" has come into its own. Etymologically, "ritual" stems from the 14th century old French "ritualis". This was a book, which contained the prescribed order of the performance of rites (usually of a religious nature). A "rite" is a formal procedure or act and is something "generally accepted" (Hoad, 1996). Over the centuries rituals have evolved away from religious contexts and of a formal written formula (the Foucauldian regime of discipline and punishment) to something with a greater secularity transmitted through the motivations of force, influence, and coercion (Foucault, 1995).

Today, ritual is often described as thoughtlessly reflexive action. But it is also repetitive, and mimetic (the intentional imitative representation of nature and human behaviour through physicality) (Fortier, 1997) – to the point that rituals become culturally invisible except for times of greater solemn ceremony (a more intentional, public, lavish ritual). The wider sweep of ritual includes those intentional/unintentional and repeated actions carried out by people in their every day lives. This range of action supports ritual as it is described here. Coupled with the idea of the more recent ideas of ritual is the everydayness with which rituals are used. Everydayness, here, meaning those experiences expected or anticipated in ordinary, daily routines of living.

There can not be one definition of power that will smoothly insinuate itself within this discussion to the agreement of all readers. Very broadly speaking, power is the ability to influence one person's choices among available alternatives to act and/or outcomes of other people's social actions.

Related to any attempt to define power is the dynamic of oppression. This element of power is often synonymous with the negative abilities of influence. To define oppression in absolute or universal terms would be a demonstration of these effects – by describing all worlds through one set of eyes and telling the broader outside world one version of "truth". Rather than speak for others, those directly affected by abusive tactics/results of power can describe what their oppression means to them in terms to which they can relate.

Depending upon how oppression is understood, will inform how the experience of emancipation/freedom is incorporated into one's perspective, such as a broader social outlook, greater freedom to act, a greater literacy among countless others. The important element is that the person who is restricted in some way can define what empowerment is for them.

How a person acts or behaves becomes a "performance." Action has to be seen by one or more people in order for it to become performance (Fortier, 1997). There needs to be some aspect of an interpretive lens present to create meaning for the movement – or the lack thereof. Particular performances carried out by, and for, the masses to enlighten, inform, and educate through a variety of forms of theatre is broadly described as "popular theatre." Generally speaking there is little or no delineation between acting and spectating spaces within popular theatre. Actors and "spect-actors" (Boal, 1985) often change roles as the story/action unfolds. The ultimate aim of popular theatre is to instill the awareness and energy for social action within groups of marginalized people. Social action is a critical component of popular theatre.

Lastly, in focussing upon clearing a space for the upcoming dance of power I would like to raise, briefly, the entity which will cut in: the Theatre of the Absurd. This term was coined in the 1950's by Martin Esslin (1961), to describe a theatre movement which began in Paris in the late 1940's and continued to grow until the mid 1960's. The purpose of this theatre is to highlight the existential angst of the times following World War II in Europe. With today's angst relating to the dark side of living, i.e. high divorce rates, youth violence, drug and sexual abuse, etc., there are definite similarities to the general anomie between the two eras. The most famous play of this genre was Waiting For Godot, by Samuel Beckett (Brustein, 1964). Roots of these performances can be traced back to Dadaists (Beginning in Switzerland between 1916-1922; their focal mission was to negativize all prevailing [Victorian] attitudes, beliefs and worldviews in order to allow for the fullest possible freedom for all). The Dada movement did not last long, but evolved into what would become the Surrealists. The Surrealists (Beginning in Paris starting in 1924 to the present; its key foci included automatism, the emancipation of thought and of language, dreams and the unconscious, "black" humor, anti-racism, pro-women, pro-proletariat, anti-capitalist – biggest proponent was Andre Breton) (Rosemont, 1978). Today, echoes and influences of these early movements can be seen today (Monty Python, Saturday Night Live, Kids in the Hall, Codco, and This Hour Has 22 Minutes among others). Theatre of the Absurd is used to dissect and pull apart present day "given" dynamics and play them back to audiences, taking the consequences of ritualized actions to their most extreme – or absurd levels – so these elements can be clarified within the meanings of the "audiences' broader lives.

With these key words in mind, what follows incorporates these ideas into one single dance movement. The ambiance is set by ritual, the dance is performed by power and exploitation.

Power and Ritual: *The Dance*

Returning to the current Chekhovian arrangement outlined in his story, there is the structure of ritual taking place. Rituals often have a sense of "sacredness" about them – a separateness from the everydayness of our lives, both in time and space. The "man of the house" has brought the governess aside to his private, inner sanctum to carry out the rite of passing money from the powerful to one being controlled. The assumption of repetition exists, here, as the governess presumably receives remuneration repeatedly on some sort of schedule and in a similar manner each time.

The uncanny similarity between the Chekhovian placement of characters in the scene and structure of "the confession" described by Foucault (1995) as a system of power is apparent through the physical position of the governess in relation to the male role. The governess (confessor) is asked to be seated close to the person who "knows best". Once the governess has "confessed" the male figure dispenses his knowledge of the world and what is best for the governess. However, the governess having a better understanding of her world acts according to her own best interests, as she perceives them.

There is a similar sense of reverence and awe expected by the "man of the house" – a sort of paying of homage to his wealth, position, and power. The governess, in the traditional female role of nurturer, is compelled to subscribe to this masculinist power's creation. Instinctively, it could be that the governess has a greater understanding of the mechanics of power as it is exercised upon her than the male figure has knowledge of the powers which constrict his agency. For example, in a field theory of power Wartenberg (1990) describes power as being imbued within any relationship and human interaction. This is because each person has his or her own sense of agency. Agency, in this case, describes a person's ability to freely choose among alternative courses of action in a given situation to achieve a particular result.

Feminist theory also speaks to the power dynamic demonstrated by Chekhov. Feminists (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1997; Gilligan, 1993; hooks, 1990; McLellan, 1995) would indicate that women tend to be more focussed upon the management of relationships, while men tend to be more focussed upon their own individuation. In this story there is the depiction of the encounter based upon a masculinist perspective, which is slanted toward competition rather than collaboration. Because of these differing perspectives – and opposing worldviews it is that we have the tensions and dynamics created. The governess may be defining her esteem based upon how successful she is in managing the relationship with her employer. The employer may be seeing this opportunity of asserting, in a competitive way, how he can impose himself and his version of the world upon his employee. The governess defers any sense of "success" in beating her employer in order to maintain a level sense of a productive relationship. Her employer may only see this as an opportunity to flex his power.

The more freedom, the greater the person's sense of agency. Each person has a "field" or environment within which they either are able or potentially able to move, and act. As two or more people come together to interact, their respective "fields" of movement, necessarily, become constricted because of the presence of the other's field for maneuvering. In the discussion of power dynamics there are at least two manifestations of how power occurs. The first is the ability of someone to have "power-over" another (Wartenberg (1990) sees this as a predominantly male version of power because of the relative importance placed upon dominance). The second is the ability of someone to have "power-to" do something for or to another (Wartenberg (1990) sees this as the female conception of power, because of the focal sense of nurturing among women. Nurturing is described as women providing empowerment to others – namely men – at the expense of empowering themselves. This could be an element found within the Chekhovian scene). In the short story we see both of these dynamics at play.

Coercive power, which the Chekhovian short story seemingly displays, is when the male figure is able to reconstitute the set of alternative moves the governess is able to make through his implied threat pervasive throughout by way of his withholding all of her money. This adjustment of available alternative courses of action restricts her

agency. These moves and counter moves can be likened to a dance. One leads, another follows. Neither one nor the other is in full control all of the time. In making these implied threats, restricts the male figure's options as well, although he does not seem to be aware of this. Coercion – along with all instances of power – produces for resistance (Foucault, 1980). Only when the governess has some effect on the male figure's actions will his power have some effect on the governess' understanding. In a very subtle way, this happens at the end of the story – when her silence and stillness, a form of resistance, results in her receiving the money she is due. She has had an effect upon him; what we do not know is what the understanding is she takes away from this exchange.

The male figure is seen as having the potential of "power-to" do a lot of things to oppress the governess. He also has the "power-over" the governess' actions – or so he may think. In this portrayed relationship we see much of the society of the late 1800's – and we see much of the dynamics of today's society in the West. Women, still, are constructed as having apportioned to them a measurably lesser "value" (particularly the work traditionally carried out by women as compared to men, generally) relative to men in society (Wartenberg, 1996). We also see the silencing that is continually carried out by those with power toward the more impoverished classes. How has this been allowed to perpetuate for over a century? Rituals.

Just as is quite recognizable in this scene, the governess is portrayed as being slavishly subservient upon the whims of someone who is more powerful in her society. We could also portray the governess as a commanding, imposing figure to the male's apologetic bearing. Why do we, as the reader/audience, construct the two characters in certain prescribed ways? Rituals.

When these two people come together, both their fields of agency become constricted. The governess' maneuverability is more explicitly narrowed, however, the male figure's is also. Just as the governess has been forced into or presumed a role, so has the male figure. He must also conform to certain prevailing social dictates, or there is the possibility he will lose his power. The female figure is seen as existing in the margins, while the male figure is seen as existing in the, then, social mainstream. But who has the greatest freedom to maneuver? Who has the greatest potential for increased agency? If it were not for the governess' role for the male to explicitly exercise power upon, the male would not have power to exercise. This is because power is a socially created dynamic; to remove the social interaction is to remove the power.

The more obvious interpretation of this short story is to see, in the woman, the facial and bodily markings of oppression. We also see within and upon the woman the imprint of the male power figure. By diminishing the agency of the governess, the male figure diminishes his own in relative terms. For many marginalized people, they know they are encased in the shadows of relative powerlessness – they may not know entirely why, how, or the degree they are caught. This may be more evident in environments where levels of wealth are less stratified than in regions where there is a significant difference between gradations of wealth, and its occurrences, versus poverty and its occurrence. In many Western societies people have been sold a hollow promise – that to have money and power automatically grants one the highest degree of freedoms – socially, economically, and politically.

Among and within social, economic, and political classes there are gates of censure (often in the form of "manners") people have to successfully negotiate – or be seen to negotiate successfully. It is not coincidental that poorer classes are decreed as

"vulgar" and wealthier classes are presumed to be "polite." As much as these prescriptions and bodily markings are meant to keep "the unsavoury" out - they also imprison those who subscribe to these conforming rituals.

Manners, a type of prescribed ritual, are often prescribed by the most powerful in society upon the mainstream – and upon those who are more marginalized - as a way to "contain" and socially control the masses. Other rituals invoked to control include Bentham's panopticonal dynamics (today's versions include photo-radar, telephone "snitch" lines, and the use of television cameras in high crime areas) (Foucault, 1995), as well as the "Church's" and television talk-shows' varying versions of "confession" (Foucault, 1980). These latter two groups invoke performances by people to reveal to those who presume to "know best." These acts of intimacy and vulnerability also provide information to those in authority who can later incorporate this in an effort to further control the masses through the "fine-tuning of access rituals" or the maintenance of service rituals and so on.

It is not coincidental, for example, television talk shows have adopted the confessional as their mode of operation. By confessing to those idolized in Western society, audiences can at some level begin to identify with those with power in society – the wealthy and the famous. At the same time, these personalities can better address and control their mass audiences by the information gleaned through their talk shows. As Foucault states, "we've become a singularly confessing society; the confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the testament" (1980, p. 35).

The dynamic of confessing also unfolds within a power relationship, as prescribed by the authority (they in turn decide of what value this information is to them). The example of the confession also highlights that power does not exist outside of relationships, but is conjured up as a result of two agents interacting within a particular space and time. Power is not static but one that requires a temporal dimension. As time passes and space is traversed the nature of power shifts to take in the new elements of the environment and interaction. Power has a primary location in the ongoing, ritualized interactions human beings have with one another (Wartenberg, 1990). For power to continue to exist it must continue to be exercised; for rituals to continue to exist they must continue to be performed. With confessions, as with other rituals there is a requirement that the power contained within it has to also incorporate a series of aims and objectives (Foucault's notion of desire within power [1978]) specific to each player.

The notion of "knowing best," Foucault (1980) suggests, is the drive for normalization evident in the 1800's; and continues through to present day. Social control and authority is about a social desire or need to have social conformity and normalization take precedence. This notion of "normalization" is not something that only the disempowered has to subscribe to. Those in authority have a very defined repertoire of actions open to them as well; to deviate from this can mean the revocation, or de-legitimation of their powers. In order to carry out this prescribed sense of normalcy, social rituals, through the "legitimacy" and "urgency" of institutional efficacy are brought about. Those in power are the ones who construct "the truth" of the world – social rituals, and ritual invoked through institutions, become the machinery by which "truth" and knowledge become validated as the most authentic. Foucault (1980) suggests that it is not what is in people's collective consciousness that needs to be addressed but social machinations by which truth is constructed and validated. In part, rituals play such a role. Are institutional policies, procedures, and other gate-keeping tactics in place to protect organizational interests or the people it supposedly serves?

Because of the aims and objectives of interacting parties, resistance, necessarily, is also built into the phenomenon of power. Resistance occurs just as the ebb and flow of power swirls throughout the interaction between or among people occurring with a plurality of forms simultaneously (Foucault, 1980). For example, because the governess follows the lead of the male figure in the short story does not, necessarily, mean that she accepts the legitimacy of what he is saying or claiming. Resistance, here, is defined as that thought, word, or deed – or silence which either stops or stunts an opposing effect from fully taking hold, or fully realizing its complete effect. The governess, through offering very little in verbal or behavioural acquiescence, raises doubt – or false belief in the mind of the male figure. The man believes one thing; when this may not be what is occurring with the governess. The male figure is forced to maneuvre based on the actions – or lack of them – carried out by the governess. This potential is an opportunity for some level of resistance to occur. The governess is not powerless in an absolute sense, but in a relative one. This creates the potential for invoking resistance. Because of the shifting nature of resistance, this is the one aspect of power that cannot be conclusively and absolutely controlled. There are ways in which the governess can achieve power over the male figure that would allow for her to counter his authority. The existence of potential alternatives gives the governess a degree of reciprocal power over the male figure. Resistances shift as the alignment in the relationship between participants adjusts. Power manifests itself when particular alignments facilitate this to occur. The Chekhovian social ritual illustrates this in a very simple, yet subtle manner. Rather than the more common view that rituals are a symbol or depiction of power, I would suggest that rituals are a form of power (Bell, 1992).

Often found within rituals are elements of metaphor. Artaud (1970) describes the height of metaphor and ritual as being the High Mass of certain Christian religions. In these instances ritual participants are invited, influenced, – or "encouraged" - to celebrate in the symbolic eating of another's flesh and the drinking of their blood through the metaphor of breaking bread and drinking of wine, respectively. The taking of High Mass has become so stylized and metaphorized that, generally, the blood/wine and flesh/bread connections become largely abstracted or lost. This raises another element of ritual, particularly as crafted by those in authority. As rituals become reflexively practiced repeatedly, the ramifications of how the people are rendered powerless is moved from consciousness to subconsciousness. It is when ritualized power is hidden in the collective subconscious that hegemony can take full root and spread its influence.

These sorts of repetitive actions can also be highlighted when we participate in the ritual living in the everyday. These repetitive actions become described as habits – as in a "person of habit." The meaning of "ritual" is broadened to include habits and the everyday routines we carry out along with the more ceremonial and formal rituals we witness from time to time. This would include the notion of "common sense". "Common sense" is a fabrication of prevailing mainstream (meaning male, straight, middle/upper class, White, Christian, able-bodied) constructions of how the world "naturally" operates. Because the mainstream and various social authorities have the power to construct knowledge this can be subconsciously ritualized as "neutral knowledge." Rituals work to order one's world, but also can restrict how an individual can interact with their environment by foreclosing options (Bell, 1992). Rather than looking at a constant or recurring event within our lives as though for the first time each time we experience it, we develop reactions to these events in a predictable and fashion. Those in authority often help shape how we make sense of these repetitious events. Ordering events in a predictable way allows a person to experience a sense of personal autonomy but not total freedom to act however one wishes, even while we are receiving a helping hand

through social institutions such as schools, the media, the courts and so on. As can be seen, the thinking, experiencing, and establishing of a daily ritual is not carried out by one person in isolation of everything else external to that individual. Many implicit and explicit sources of influence shape personal habits or rituals as they are defined and/or evolved. As ritualized ways of knowing are experienced, there is an understanding of perceptions of the world and our constructed placements within it.

Mezirow (1999) points out that rituals involve "myths" constructed through a process of reification. Rituals are informed by social interactions, in which myths play a role. In my view myths are also an outcome of ritual. Key social interactions, and creators/perpetuators of social myths include family, friends, role models, "social authorities", the media, education, among others. These groups have formed opinions of other people they ritualistically interact with; as a result they compartmentalize people into entities of constructed "known-ness" - a sort of "normalization" or predictability. Once these categories become "fixed" in an individual's consciousness, any changes realized is attributed to the person, not to the meaning constructed by the perceiver.

If things are heard often enough, or witnessed, or experienced in similar ways things, habits or rituals develop. These become reified as though immutable. Mezirow (1999) highlights these outcomes as social "myths." Myths become the "thing constructed". Rituals become the methodology for constructing these. Social "myths" become highlighted as "false" when the beliefs no longer support the perceived ordered nature of the world constructed by the individual. The connections may become broken. The world, at one point organized, may become disjointed. Many adults, at this juncture, can take these periods of dysfunction and grow in profound ways. Others become lost in their disorientation. These beliefs are often evolved to "form fit" within broader constellations of belief structures held by the individual. Myths are often examined, but not how myths, through ritual, are constructed. People need to take examine, critically, rituals, either knowingly or not knowingly participated in to determine the ways they inadvertently oppress.

Escaping from the clutches of ritual and habit is often emotionally daunting because large amounts of feeling, psychological effort, and deeply held beliefs are often invested in these exercises. It is often easier to discount competing modes of behaviour, attitudes and beliefs, than to amend ways of seeing and interacting in the world. If knowledge is examined as to how it is constructed, rather than what is created, understanding, in a critical way, as to how social power contros us can be identified. Rather than be buffeted by the whims of those in social control, alternative versions of ritual can be constructed and ritualized knowledge created. Increased personal agency and control can be realized within the mainstream – or more importantly – in the margins of society. One potentially powerful way of carrying this out is through popular theatre – and specifically the ritual form of this theatre: The Theatre of the Absurd.

<u>On the Main Dance Floor with Popular/Avant-Garde Theatre: *"Cutting In"*</u>

Popular theatre is carried out by and for the masses; its focus is collective social action. Theatre carried out by professional actors for marginalized groups is more accurately a type of "performative ethnography". Another key purpose of popular theatre is to educate and enlighten people about the circumstances, injustices and inequities they face – to "conscientize" (Freire, 1996). These forms of theatre are, generally, carried out with little or no delineation between acting and spectating spaces – the actors

and "spect-actors" (Boal, 1985) often change roles as the story and action unfolds. Within the over-arching field of popular theatre there are many forms this can take – from puppetry, stage forms, dances, festivals– to rituals.

Theatre of the Absurd draws largely from ritual, although all art forms are included. The theatrical lineage that preceded the Theatre of the Absurd includes the influences of Meyerhold, Breton, Bakhtin, Artaud, Brecht, Grotowski, Barba, and Boal, among others. To delineate popular theatre from other broad forms of theatre Barba (1985) refers to popular theatre as the "Third Theatre." The "First Theatre" includes commercial, state-subsidized performances with high production values (expensive, elaborate, and extensive costumes, sets, props and grand lighting and soundscapes) imbued with a strong tendency for a greater sense of concrete naturalism/realism with audience/actors neatly compartmentalized. This theatre takes place in specially constructed "palaces" for the monied classes of society "to be seen" rather than to see the performances on stage. The "Second Theatre" Barba describes as being the highly experimental , avant-garde style of performance which may or may not be state-subsidized, and remains within the purview of the same monied and educated classes. This version of commercial theatre tends to be very abstract and metaphorical. Barba's Second Theatre can be mistaken for the Theatre of the Absurd's dynamics – namely its reliance upon abstraction and metaphor. The popular theatre genre is created by the people for the people (many of whom exist in the social margins) to educate and enlighten – with a focus toward social action. These offerings of theatre from the margins are carried out with little, or no budget and only the most rudimentary of production values. The Theatre of the Absurd is performed with a combination of concrete realism is coupled with abstraction and metaphor in a highly physical, action-oriented, instinctual, and emotional theatre where both audience and "actors" become one (the stage disappears). Rather than the separation of audience and performers – everyone participates in a collective ritual which culminates into the entry of the beginnings of collective social action. The Theatre of the Absurd, as a branch of popular theatre exists most comfortably in Barba's Third Theatre – popular theatre.

Meyerhold, around 1900 in Russia, began to experiment with traditional, commercial theatre in increasingly unconventional ways, drawing upon Bakhtin's (1986) writings on the "grotesque." Meyerhold (Eaton, 1985) referred to his emerging form of theatre as the Theatre of the Grotesque (1900 – mid 1930's). In this genre Meyerhold would exaggerate normal social interactions and take them to an extreme degree in order to have the relationships reveal their hidden characteristics (Symons, 1971).

The central figure in the Theatre of the Absurd's theorization, Antonin Artaud, spent much of his time in the theatre until his early forties. Through this time Artaud is in and out of insane asylums; the final ten years of his life he was confined to an asylum. Through these incarcerations he writes what becomes a pivotal text for the Theatre of the Absurd, The Theatre and Its Double (1970) in 1948. Through his own experiences of failure within mainstream theatre, Artaud becomes disillusioned with the existing commercial theatre, which he believes is sucking the life out of the people. His metaphor for the contemporary commercial theatre is the "plague". As a disease within the theatre, Artaud believed that this "contagion" uses the theatre to spread the scourge of emptiness and uncritical thinking to the masses and has been turned into a play thing of the idle rich. He believed that the theatre should be a place to critically explore the various dimensions of current living, while opening up the possibilities for new ways of being for all people – a source of mass adult education.

Artaud makes his life's mission the theorizing of a new theatre which is an "anti-theatre," in opposition to the theatre whose only interest is in domesticating the masses into a dulling, neatly summarized view of the world. In a similar vein to Meyerhold, Artaud names his theatre, The Theatre of Cruelty. Cruelty, here, is meant to describe a jarring disruption of the effects of commercial theatre and the "true ugliness" of the world. Artaud believes that there is too much emphasis on language (words and their meanings he believed were controlled by the wealthy and educated classes; to remove the emphasis upon verbal language he felt would reduce, dramatically, the power of those in authority). This spurs his interest in reducing the word in his theatre to just one of many production elements (Artaud, 1970). Sets, costumes, props have as much or, at times, more value than words. His focus is placed upon his creating a new theatre, from the ground up, which allows for people's dreams, primal desires to come lashing out in a performance area involving the participants in profound ways – to loosen the bindings of social convention. Artaud never is able to experiment with his theories because of his incarceration and relatively early death.

It is Jerzy Grotowski (1968), and his Actor's Lab in Poland, in the early 1960's who would take Artaud's writings, physically bringing them into reality. Grotowski's theatre primarily minimizes words, while elevates the physicality of the body. He believes that far more than our consciousness, our bodies have memories and experiences physically carved upon them. In order to communicate our memories to others a reliance upon physical re/action and "body talk" (Wolford, 1996) rather than words is undertaken. Many of Grotowski's performances are for small select groups because his theatre has been more of a movement laboratory - pushing the actors through their bodies in increasingly finite and complex ways to tell their stories (Richards, 1995). His theatre is a theatre stricken of any "loud", expensive production values. Theatre, to Grotowski, is about bodies and space telling stories – through the ritual of movement.

A contemporary of Artaud's and who takes much of Artaud's writing translating it into his own unique styling is Bertolt Brecht. He believes in a "popular" theatre for the masses – to educate the people, raising themselves up from oppression and better understanding the world around them (Eaton, 1985). Brecht's theatre removes all sentimentality, being famous for the removal of the theatrical "fourth wall," typical of Aristotelian (commercial) theatre. In this latter theatrical form the audience is constructed as seeing into the action on stage because of the invisible "wall" between them and the performance space. Brecht (1964) does away with this convention by invoking something he calls "alienation." The focus turns the traditional theatre and its space into a type of social laboratory for the audience to explore "objectively" their collective and individual placement in the world. Brecht carries this out by having his actors shift between themselves as people and their characters on stage, while at the same time allowing the actors to speak directly with the audience. These two newly devised dynamics provided for the alienating nature of Brechtian theatre – distancing the artifice of theatre while bringing the actors and the audience closer together in their mutual explorations. These efforts objectify the theatre in a way that the audience can explore the lives of the characters scientifically, applying lessons learned back to their own life situations. Theatre is not only to entertain, but also to teach and educate (Eaton, 1985).

In the 1970's an adult educator, Paulo Freire, and a theatre/literacy teacher, Augusto Boal, in Brazil and Peru respectively, begin to inform one another's work involving the liberation of oppressed people. Freire carries this out through language, pictures, and literacy education– and his concept of conscientization (Freire, 1996), while Boal achieves this through what he termed "rehearsal for freedom and living"

(Boal, 1985). Freire's central text, entitled Pedagogy of the Oppressed, (1996) can be construed as the theory, while Boal's central text, entitled Theatre of the Oppressed (1985), can be thought of as the practical and experiential teaching methodology.

Freire's approach takes pictures of the peasants' living situation and uses these picture/word combinations to raise existential themes with the people as a way of elevating their awareness of their oppression, while teaching literacy. Boal begins with the physicality of oppression upon the bodies of peasants and those who were illiterate and begins from a physical "language" moving into the use of words/actions and eventually stories and "rehearsals for emancipation."

The potential promise of the Theatre of the Absurd, coupled with the explorations into ritual, allows those disempowered individuals and groups an entry into the ongoing fields of power in operation in society. As the Western mainstream, particularly institutions, relies upon rituals to ensure its position of power so can "the masses" invent rituals of its own to re-inscribe upon themselves a greater sense and reality of agency. Through looking at the various nodes, which are a part of living or rituals, within daily lives can be examined as to why certain rituals and habits of rites are in place, who insisted that they be there, and to whose benefit they are there?

What is being alluded to here is another component of power: transformative power. The ability and power to change one's restricted agency is the creation of transformative power. This form of control is a use of power that seeks to bring about its own obsolescence. Once empowerment is achieved transformative power is allowed to recede into the background until it is conjured forth in the future. The power of reconstructing another's sense of self is a use of power in which the welfare of the other is the guiding motivation of the one who possesses power (Wartenberg, 1990). A key aspect of what is described here is the idea of trust being central to the establishment of a truly transforming and empowering relationship. Through working in group ritual, individuals feel a sense of belonging, while working on issues of increasing individual agency in a sense of group belonging. This is the central power of transformative ritual – and of the Theatre of the Absurd.

There is an aspect of subversion, necessarily included in this work. Often when those in power become aware that those whom they control are working toward higher and broader levels of conscientization, there is an immediate pang of having their own sense of authority being threatened, or of resistance. Rather than encourage the development and expansion of more and diffuse power in society, there is an assumption among the power elite that power is of finite quantity. Rather than encourage, elite power works toward repression.

Rituals operate under a cloak of innocuous operation within the current status quo. In particular, the work on revising or creating new rituals occurs with great effect within various social institutions. A key institution filled with various rituals of normalization is the educational system (public, private, and post-secondary). By way of ending this paper here are a few questions for reflection...

1. What rituals are there to gain entrance, to maintain one's position in educational institutions, and to leave educational institutions?
2. Who defines "success" and "failure"?
3. Whose interests are being served and safeguarded?
4. Who is included and excluded from the various rituals? Why?

5. Where are rituals positioned within the academic institution?
6. How does ritual inform the teacher/learner relationship?

Other institutions, daily routines, and aspects of everyday living can be examined in the same way. Deeper explorations can come about through the Theatre of the Absurd and the extrapolation of rituals in a "grotesque" or "black humor" manner. Future research areas include how disempowered and disenfranchised cultural and social groups experience various rituals invoked upon them. Another important area includes what to do once these invisible systems of power are uncovered. How can the collective creation of the Theatre of the Absurd invoke social action leading to greater empowerment? The Theatre of the Absurd can play an empowering role.

Dance: *Finale*

What this paper begins to do is provide some of the groundwork for the exploration of the use of ritual as both a form of social control and as a potential for social transformation. Beginning this discussion, definitions of key notions and terms are outlined. Likened to a dance floor, the rest of the environment and players are provided. Drawing from Chekhov's 1883 short story, The Nincompoop, the two characters are likened to elements of power and exploitation as they are played out through a scene of ritual.

Ritual, the often forgotten element of daily human living, is raised as the most important in uncovering dynamics of oppression. From the notion of ritual, a particular type of popular theatre is incorporated as a means for exploring entry points for describing existing rituals while inventing new ones. This provides a potential for amending entrenched rituals as a way of reconstituting a more diffuse and equitable agency and power to those on the margins alongside that of the social mainstream. The particular type of popular theatre espoused in this article is that of "The Theatre of the Absurd". This ritualistic theatre draws from its antecedents – most notably Dadaism, Surrealism, and Absurdist Popular Theatre – to, both, deconstruct systems of oppression and construct a more empowering methodology.

By way of closing this discussion I raise up how institutions, most notably educational institutions, invoke rituals to enforce regimes of normalcy. This has direct ramifications for those who practice adult education in formal, informal, and non-formal settings. So the next time there is a wonderment of why learners do the things they do, perhaps what needs to be asked is, "What are the rituals we have inadvertently set in action to have learners perform the way they do."

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APPENDIX:
A NINCOMPOOP

A few days ago I asked my children's governess, Julia Vassilyevna to come into my study.

"Sit down, Julia Vassilyevna," I said. "Let's settle our accounts. Although you most likely need some money, you stand on ceremony and won't ask for it yourself. Now then, we agreed on thirty rubles a month..."

"Forty."

"No, thirty. I made a note of it. I always pay the governess thirty. Now then, you've been here two months, so...."

"Two months and five days."

"Exactly two months. I made a specific note of it. That means you have sixty rubles coming to you. Subtract nine Sundays...you know you don't work with Kolya on Sundays, you only took walks. And three holidays..."

Julia Vassilyevna flushed a deep red and picked at the flounce of her dress, but – not a word.

"Three holidays, therefore, take off twelve rubles. Four days Kolya was sick and there were no lessons, as you were occupied only with Vanya. Three days you had a toothache and my wife gave you permission not to work after lunch. Twelve and seven – nineteen. Subtract...that leaves.....hmmmm...forty-one rubles. Correct?"

Julia Vassilyevna's left eye reddened and filled with moisture. Her chin trembled; she coughed nervously and blew her nose, but – not one word.

"Around New Year's you broke a teacup and saucer: take off two rubles. The cup cost more, it was an heirloom, but – let it go. When didn't I take a loss! Then, due to your neglect, Kolya climbed a tree and tore his jacket: take away ten. Also, due to your heedlessness the maid stole Vanya's shoes. You ought to watch out for everything! You get paid for it. So that means five more rubles off. The tenth of January I gave you ten rubles..."

"You didn't," whispered Julia Vassilyevna.

"But I made a note of it."

"Well...all right."

"Take away twenty-seven from forty-one – that leaves fourteen."

Both eyes filled with tears. Perspiration appeared on the thin, pretty little nose. Poor girl!

"Only once was I given money," she said in a trembling voice, "and that was by your wife. Three rubles, nothing more."

"Really? You see, now, and I didn't make a note of it! Take away three from fourteen...leaves eleven. Here's your money, my dear. Three, three, three, one, and one. Here it is!"

I handed her eleven rubles. She took them and with trembling fingers stuffed them into her pocket.

"Merci," she whispered.

I jumped up and started pacing the room. I was overcome with anger.

"For what, this – Merci?" I asked.

"For the money."

"But you know I've cheated you, for God's sake – robbed you! I have actually stolen from you! Why this 'Merci?'"

"In my other places they didn't give me anything at all."

"They didn't give you anything? No wonder! I played a little joke on you, a cruel lesson, just to teach you...I'm going to give you the entire eighty rubles! Here they are in an envelope all ready for you...Is it really possible to be so spineless! Why don't you protest? Why be silent? Is it possible in this world to be without teeth and claws – to be such a nincompoop?"

She smiled crookedly and I read in her expression: "It is possible."

I asked her pardon for the cruel lesson and, to her great surprise, gave her the eighty rubles. She murmured her little, "Merci" several times and went out. I looked after her and thought, "How easy it is to crush the weak in this world!"

Short Story by Anton Chekhov, in 1883.